How Astrology Survived the Rise of Christianity: A Brief Literature Review

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The practice of astrology is something that has been highly contentious over time. Its utility and validity have been both defended and denounced by many, and yet it still exists (although to varying definitions and degrees) in modern times. It is my opinion that the scientific properties of astrology are what allowed astrology to stand the test of time. The following discussion will examine the Early to Late Middle Ages when within the practice of the Christian religion, it was seen as heretical to practice astrology. I hope to exemplify both the arguments against astrology put forth by Christian scholars, and to show examples of how astrology managed to stay relevant despite this denouncement.

As defined by Loar (2018), Astrology is a "fundamental search for meaning by observing cycles and interpreting correspondences between celestial occurrences, planetary positions, human affairs, and terrestrial events."(131). This definition encompasses both calculation and meaning. This principal understanding is necessary to properly appreciate the aims of astrology as either a Religious System, a Philosophy, a Science, or a combination of all three. Upon its transmission from pre-Babylonian Sumerian cultures to that of the Romans and Greeks, astrology's use was predictive and informative in nature and was used in terms of omens and the determination of large scale agricultural and social events (Beck, 2006). At this time astrology was both scientific, using observation and calculation with respect to the fixed stars, planetary movements, and their respective positions in the zodiac, and philosophical in terms of bringing meaning to these phenomena as they related to mundane earthly events.

There were several different types of astrology being regularly practiced in the centuries following the turn of the millennium. Hegedus (2007) notes several prominent astrologers including, Manilus, Ptolemy, Vettius Valens and Firmicus Maternus (1), and from these authors we see various kinds of practical astrology emerging. Examples of these include *Melothesia* or Medical Astrology, in which the cosmos were said to influence specific parts of the human body and had assignments to their respective body parts in terms of illness diagnosis and notable times in which the application of medicine would be most beneficial (Hegedus 2007, 2). The most obvious example of this is that of the Zodiac Man (see appendix). Further examples include

Catholic Astrology which was said to govern individual zones of the earth (Hegedus 2007, 6), and *Genethlialogy Astrology* which is commonly known as individual birth charts i.e. mapping the position of the stars and planets and determining their placements in the zodiac at the moment of an individual's birth (Hegedus 2007, 6). Pingree (2001) elaborates on this list beginning with the addition of *Catarchic Astrology* (the most favorable time for commencing any activity,) which was further divided into several subtypes including *Medical Astrology, Marriage Astrology, and Military Astrology* (18). Pingree (2001) notes that *Catarchic Astrology* eventually gave birth to a new science referred to as *Interrogational Astrology,* and this broadened the definition further to allow for event prediction for any given phenomenon brought forth by the querent (19). These examples illustrate that the science of astrology was a growing practice and quite common place.

The philosophical portion of Astrology could be viewed as religion respectively as it integrated the animism of gods in terms of their archetypal planetary meanings, and these meanings subsequently guiding the interpretations of the mathematical calculations. The cultural/astrological belief at the time was that all things have a spirit (specifically celestial objects in this instance,) and that explicit daily rituals and practices would in turn placate these gods or spirits. The observance of these rituals would determine terrestrial reality in either a positive or a negative way. The polytheistic views of the Greeks and Romans at the time of transmission supported the integration of these astrological principles into their pagan belief system. In his book *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology,* Hegedus (2007) asserts that these religious connotations imbedded in astrological doctrine are a main source of tension in terms of the Christian rivalry with astrology that would ensue (10).

Kern-Ulmer (1996) further notes that within ancient Greek literature, astrological principles/magic were employed using the technique of sympathies. The energy of the cosmos could be interjected upon in either a sympathetic (additive) or antipathetic (subtractive) nature to bring about a desired outcome in the realms previously mentioned. Because it was the cosmos that determined all natural phenomena based on celestial movements, and the deities that were being ritualized and obeyed were archetypically representative of the planets, the implication of performing astrological magic/ritual was then to placate the cosmic realms (Gods) to bring about beneficial outcomes for the earth, its objects, and its inhabitants through this idea of sympathies. Hegedus (2007) asserts that, "The doctrine of cosmic sympathy was based not only on observation of "…natural phenomena but also, in religious contexts, on divine revelation." (2) The author

stresses that this left little room for the biblical view of the "divine creator who was external to the universe," and "undermines Christian views of divine providence and free will." (Hegedus 2007, 12).

Beginning in the fourth century as Christian doctrine became more mainstream there is an emergence of literature that mirrors the sentiments above that was designed to denounce astrology as paganistic and heretical. Astrology and its association with fatalism and magic came to be seen as an implausible system and was denounced for its contrariness to that of free will and divine creation (Hegedus 2007). According to many Christian scholars of the time, astrology was not to be ascribed to along side the acknowledgement of the Christian faith. Numerous influential figures such as Basil of Caesarea, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and Origen presented multiple texts arguing against astrology and its validity on these grounds (Hegedus 2007).

Hegedus (2007) consolidates five common arguments against astrology by these authors in his text as follows: 1) The argument of practical impossibility; 2) The argument of different destinies; 3) The argument of common destinies; 4) The arguments from animals; 5) The moral argument (25). Regarding each of these arguments, the author spends a great deal of time citing clear examples from original text, indicating their intended rational (Hegedus, 2007). While the total extrapolation of each argument and the concurrent view by each author is beyond the current scope, there appeared a common goal amongst the early Christian scholars to denounce predictive astrology within the emerging Christian framework of the time.

Despite these arguments, astrology did survive throughout the early Middle Ages. In the text, *Hexemeron of Saint Basil the Great and cosmological views of his time*, Danezis, Theodossiou, and Dimitrijevic (2005) address the Hexemeron of Saint Basil the Great as an early account of astrological principles being amalgamated into the science of astronomy. Although Saint Basil is noted as an early advocate of Christianity, he was also a "deep connoisseur of astronomy and the physical sciences," (Danezis, Theodossiou, and Dimitrijevic 2005, 105). Saint Basils' adoption of cosmological ideas is described as very "harmonious" to those of the ancient Greeks, Babylonians, and Egyptians in terms of star cycles, the existence of the zodiac and declinations of planets. The assertion here is that this similarity is likely a result of Saint Basil having spent time in regions of Mesopotamia in his youth where these cosmological ideas are seen to have originated (Danezis, Theodossiou, and Dimitrijevic 2005, 104). In his discourse however, Saint Basil does not mention the astrological doctrine that would have informed his astronomical

observances, but rather has a discussion regarding the origin and existence of time as it relates to the creation story of Genesis (Danezis, Theodossiou, and Dimitrijevic 2005, 103).

Arguments such as this begin the apparent dissection of *Astronomy* as a science versus the heretical doctrine of predictive *Astrology*. This dissection is of importance as it allows the utilization of very real and necessary scientific principles regarding the cosmos and their relation to natural earthly phenomena, whilst leaving behind the morally inadequate ideas such as casting birth charts, ritualizing planets as Gods and believing that planets had more control over people and terrestrial events than "God" the Christian creator. Hegedus (2007) argues that discourse in the Almagest by Ptolemy also inadvertently helps to legitimize this dissection. The scientific and mathematical nature of the *Almagest* allows for "Astronomy" to become legitimized due to its practical and testable nature, while assigning the *Tetrabiblous* to the philosophical and interpretive realm of "Astrology.". It is of convenience regarding their goals to denounce astrology as a religious/philosophical tradition that many scholarly arguments leave behind the Tetrabiblous whilst ascribing to the mathematical principles in the Almagest. Hegedus (2007) suggests that the language and conceptualization used by Ptolemy in his own text in effect creates a basis for a distinction between philosophical forms of "Astrology" and the scientific practice of "Astronomy." (5).

With respect to the critical adoption of astronomical sciences within the Christian societal framework, Laistner (1941) explains that during the Carolingian Age (approx. 800 – 887 C.E.) an anonymous letter is found that stresses the omission of Astrology and Medicine within the subjects of the *quadrivium* as problematic and dates this omission back to the time of Isidore. The quadrivium was a section of the seven liberal arts (geometry, astronomy, music, and mathematics) that structured early monastic curricular study (Backman, 2022), and at its earliest outset was said to "introduce skills needed for the liberal, symbolic and allegorical interpretations of the Holy Writ," (Backman 2022, 107).

In *The Etymologies,* the Latin Bishop Isidore of Seville does clearly ascribe to astronomy (part of the quadrivium) as an area of study and notes it as the detailed reading of the stars and the courses of their constellations as relative to earth (Barney et al. 2015, 99). What is important with respect to the sentiments by our anonymous author is that Isidore openly separates the science of astronomy as "…the turning of the heavens, the rising, setting, and motion of the stars, and where the constellations get their names.," and astrology as "…partly natural and partly superstitious."

(Barney et al. 2015, 99). Isidore displays clear astrological knowledge and asserts the necessity of such knowledge for navigation by sea and prediction in terms of seasonal qualities, but for this he references only the fixed stars. When making mention of the planets and zodiacal signs Isidore, clearly states that the worship or adherence to belief in these (planets and signs) is a belief strengthened by the devil and is paganistic (Barney et al., 2015).

Although Isidore displays knowledge of the traditional/ancient meanings given to the planets and the zodiacal signs, he is very clear in that he believes these ideas to be anti-Christian, "Therefore, observations of the stars, or horoscopes, or other superstitions that attach themselves to the study of the stars, that is for the sake of knowing fates – these are undoubtedly contrary to our faith, and ought to be so completely ignored by Christians that it seems they have not been written about." (Barney et al. 2015, 106); but belief in the fixed stars (i.e. astronomy) was noted to be in alignment with Christianity, "But whatever the type of superstition with which they have been named by many men, the stars are nevertheless things that God created at the beginning of the world, and he set them in order that he might define the seasons by their particular motions." (Barney et al. 2015, 106).

Regarding medical doctrine there is also an astrological omission in his text. Isidore describes his understanding of medicine and outlines three distinct schools therein; one of which is rational and attributed to Hippocrates. Isidore ascribes to the Hippocratic doctrine of the four humors as the four elements of the body that are the cause and cure for illness (Barney et al. 2015, 109). Although Isidore describes in detail his understanding of the *Humors*, how they are seen to cause disease, and that sympathetic remedies are incurred to help with these ailments, he makes no mention of the astrological doctrine aside from his brief discussion of critical days (as seen earlier the idea of critical days is derived from catarchic astrological doctrine) (Barney et al., 2015). In *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humors.,* by Noga Arikha (2007) it is further noted that "To each humoral category would eventually correspond also to a time of day, a color, a taste, a type of fever, a main organ, governing musical modes, a tutelary planet and a set of astrological signs." (11). Again, within the medical discourse of Isidore's *Etymologies* we see the divergence of astrological science and philosophy with the dissection of astronomy from its original astrological forms.

In the "foundations of medicine" section Isidore does mention the necessity of geometry as a system of knowledge in that it allows the physician to be aware of the "qualities of the regions

and location of places, may he teach what the person should attend to there." (Barney et al. 2015, 115) and a mention of astronomy in so far as "…he may observe the logic of the stars and the change of seasons. For, as a certain physician says, according to their mutations our bodies are also changed." (Barney et al. 2015, 115); but again, makes no association between these principles and those of their astrological roots i.e. melothesic and catholic astrology.

As we move into the later Middle Ages, we see a huge transmission and revival of ancient texts that make their way from Africa into the European region (Clark 1995). Within these texts are large amounts of information regarding ancient astrological doctrine and a revival can be seen as Raymond of Marseilles begins to spread the new science of these texts throughout Europe (Clark 1995). There is evidence that Raymond was cognizant of the Christian church when revitalizing and disseminating these documents, and he is careful to align himself and his mission alongside that of the Christian Church (Clark 1995). Raymond asserts that "God himself wishes us to study the stars…: (Clark 1995, 95) and that "The planets indicate nothing unless God predestines them to." (Clark 1995, 95). Raymond goes on to cite works by Arabic scholars such as Abu Ma'shar as he praises the use of astrology in medicine, describing the validity of physicians learning the courses of the planets to provide accurate medical care (Clark 1995). Raymond did not go without his adversaries, but Clark (1995) notes that there was in fact an "uncomfortable marriage of Christianity and astrology." (99) emerging at this time.

Lastly, I would like to turn to the afore mentioned Zodiac Man. The Zodiac Man is the illustration of a male figure, standing with his legs and arms slightly spread, depicting the twelve images of the Zodiac superimposed on his body from Aries (the head) to Pisces (the feet) (Clark 1982, 1). Clark (1982) describes the zodiac man as a quick reference guide for physicians, surgeons, and laymen to determine which part of the body was ruled by which astrological sign. The information provided by the Zodiac man was used to guide treatment (alongside the placement of the moon) and was a practice which began with Ptolemy in the first century and was carried on throughout the Middle Ages (Clark, 1982). The ancient conception of the Zodiac Man was drawn upon via the concept of as above so below, the microcosm within the macrocosm, which forms the basis for astrological doctrine itself (Clark, 1982). Clark (1982) notes that the foundation of the Hippocratic model is also derived from these principles and created the groundwork for his humoral theory. Clark (1982) cites use of the Zodiac man throughout the Middle Ages with examples such as Manilus' list of correspondences that appear in his writing between 704-709

(Clark 1995). Again, we see a clear indication that in terms of science, i.e. medicine, there were astrological principles that were adopted despite the Christian arguments regarding astrology as heretical and of no use.

Although this review is clearly not inclusive of all possible texts and instances referring to the Christian treatment of astrology and the reasons for which astrology remained valid throughout the Middle Ages, I do hope to have highlighted that the scientific use of astrology was instrumental in its survival throughout this time. Despite the denouncement of many different influential Christian Scholars, there seemed no way to "get around" the guidance of the cosmos when it came to certain aspects of daily life i.e. navigation, seasonal changes, and of course in medicine. The utility of astrology in these realms led the critics of the time to adopt a dissective model that allowed for the separation of certain tenets within traditional astrological doctrine from that of scientific astronomy, a phenomenon we still see today. It is this dissection that allowed certain forms of astrology to remain quietly active throughout the Middle Ages until the transmission of ancient texts flowed back into the region, further revitalizing the practice. It is my hope that in the future, as astrology continues to become more "mainstream" and accepted, we can again see the convergence of science and philosophy and this ancient system can be utilized to its full extent moving forward.

Appendix

"Red/Black Zodiac Man in Wheel"
https://onlineexhibits.library.yale.edu/s/medicalastrology/media/15529

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